AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES

By David Fagg, Youth Research Officer

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A. Introduction

As people committed to working with young people and their families, we do not have the luxury of working with families as we would like them to be. We work with Australian families as they are. And they are many and varied. Nuclear, extended, mixed, blended, gay, step, lesbian, de facto, married, divorced. Add to that the fact that families vary widely in their quality of life: from child abuse and incest through to "just liveable" through to happy and contented. Add to that the differing cultural and ethnic groups in Australia which shape families according to long-held assumptions passed down through generations. Australian families are bewildering in their variety.

Many Christian commentators seem to want to put the genie back in the bottle, to return to an imagined time when families consisted of a man and a woman, joined in loving marriage under God until death, who raised children to look after themselves and contribute to their community. This is my experience, and it may be the experience of many people reading this paper. But the reality of Australian families usually differs from this vision.

B. Why Examine The Family?

In many churches over the past few decades youth work and youth workers have been viewed with suspicion. Youth have sometimes been seen as a 'problem' to deal with rather than as an essential part of the congregation. In 'family-oriented' churches, youth ministry might sometimes be seen to divide the church. Youth workers in a church context have often had to fight hard to achieve recognition of the unique needs and characteristics of teenagers. However, this has led to youth work which views the young person in isolation from their family. Such a view cannot survive reality for any length of time. For youth workers who have spent any more than a few weeks with young people, it is obvious that the domain of Christian youth work includes the family.

social capital
resources and skills which an individual uses to negotiate society and relationships

The primary concern of youth workers is the wellbeing of young people in every aspect of life. The primary way in which young people are shaped is through their family. It is also one important way in which young people build up their **social capital**.[1] Therefore it is important to study the family. Let's begin by surveying the history of the family.

C. History Of The Family

Families have looked different in the past, and have served different purposes.

- *Survival:* most people have an instinct to bear and raise children. In times gone by, this was a hazardous endeavour. Purely from a practical point of view, a woman bearing a child would have been insane to have a child deliberately on her own. Think of societies in which subsistence agriculture was the way of life. The difficulties of raising money or other sustenance for a single mother in an agricultural society are mind-boggling. It makes sense to "team up" with a man ie. someone who will not have to bear children and can therefore provide for the needs of the woman and child/ren. In this sense, we can see why polygamy began: it makes sense if there are too many women compared to marriageable men.

- *Raising children:* having multiple role models is good for a small child. In addition, children make attachments at a young age, enabling them to trust others and relate healthily. Marriage provides a stability that is crucial to this attachment process, particularly in the early years. Recent research on 'attachment disorder' indicates that children need stable adults present in early years so that they can learn how to form healthy attachments.

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[1] Holland, J et al Transitions, *Networks and Communities*

- *Extended Family:* in cultures and times where retirement or nursing homes are unheard of, older or unmarried family members lived with the immediate family. This continues today in some cultures.

- *Nuclear Family:* the nuclear family (1 or 2 parents + children), living by themselves, is a fairly new phenomenon. Small families in separate living arrangements require a high level of financial independence. In Australia, many people have no experience of any other type of family, apart from a grandparent living in a granny flat. Families from some ethnic and indigenous communities are an obvious exception to this trend.
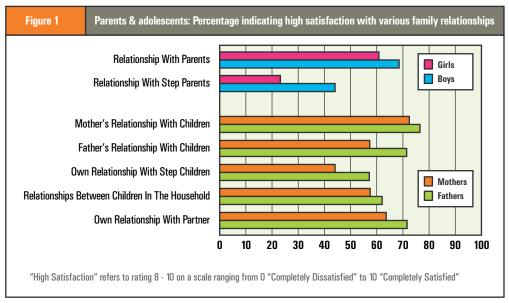
D. Australia's Families

I hesitate to draw the boundaries of what a 'family' is, mainly because it is an immensely political topic. Genesis 1 seems to imply "one woman, one man" but then various biblical leaders had multiple wives! On the other hand, 1 Timothy 3 characterises leaders (overseers & deacons) as having one wife. So, I'll take some guidance from the Introduction (above) in which I argued that we need to work with Australian families as they are.

Instead of coming up with a succinct definition of 'family', I will outline some of the facts about Australian families.

1. General Statistics on Australian Families [2]

- In 2001, there were 1.1 million families with adolescents
- 40% of these families also had children less than 12 years old
- In 66% of couple families, both parents worked
- In 9% of couple families, both parents were unemployed
- 33% of fathers worked more than 48 hours per week.
- 60% of families live in metropolitan areas
- The graph below indicates that a higher proportion of boys tend to have 'high satisfaction' with their relationship with their parents.

Figure 1 — Parents & adolescents: Percentage indicating high satisfaction with various family relationships

"High Satisfaction" refers to rating 8 - 10 on a scale ranging from 0 "Completely Dissatisfied" to 10 "Completely Satisfied"
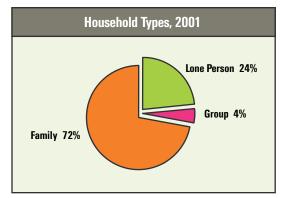
Source: Snapshots of Australian Families with Adolescents, AIFS
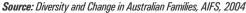
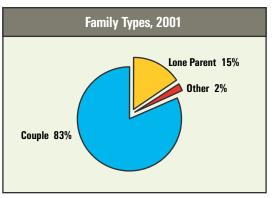[2] Mainly from AIFS, Snapshots of Australian Families with Adolescents

2. Different Types

In Australia, there are various types of families, and various types of households. Note that in statistics on this topic, families and households are different, because not all households have families (one person households) and some households have more than one family:
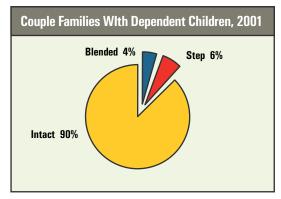
- Most families are couples - 82.5%.
- There is a small percentage of step and blended families: 3.3% of all families.
- Single parents constitute 24.7% of all families with dependent children.
- 87.6% of all couples are married.
- 12.4% of couples are cohabiting or de facto.
- A large percentage of couple families have no children in their household (35.7%). Of these, a significant proportion could be older couples whose children have all moved out.
- Households in which there is only 1 person make up 24% of all households. This does not necessarily mean they have chosen to live alone. They may have separated from a partner or their partner has died.
- Of couple families with dependent children, 90% are intact, meaning that they are not step-families or blended families.
- Over the past 25 years, the percentage of couple families with children has decreased at about the same rate as couple families *without* children has *increased*.
- Over the past 25 years, the percentage of lone parents has increased slightly. This could be accounted for by the rise in the divorce rate over that time.

Household Types, 2001

Lone Person 24%

Group 4%

Family 72%

Source: Diversity and Change in Australian Families, AIFS, 2004

Family Types, 2001

Lone Parent 15%

Other 2%

Couple 83%

Source: Diversity and Change in Australian Families, AIFS, 2004

Couple Families WIth Dependent Children, 2001

Blended 4%

Step 6%

Intact 90%

Source: Diversity and Change in Australian Families, AIFS, 2004

[2] Mainly from AIFS, *Snapshots of Australian Families with Adolescents*

| Figure 2 | Family Types, 1976 - 2001 |

Couple with Dependent Children
Couple Only
Couple with Non-Dependent Children
Other Families
Lone Parent with Dependent Children

Source: *Diversity and Change in Australian Families, AIFS, 2004*

3. Issues in Australian Families

Australian families face many issues that I have not mentioned here, such as cultural conflict, domestic violence and child abuse. However, given there is not space to cover all these, I have chosen 5.

A. Education Anxiety

One of the major transformations in Australian families has been the explosion of private and independent schooling options. Whereas once private schooling was the domain of wealthy or Catholic families, increasingly private education is seen as an option for all families. In 1979, 78% of students attended government schools, with 22% attending private or Catholic schools. In 2005, students attending government schools made up 67% (a drop of 11%) and those attending non-government schools made up 33% (an increase of 11%). This trend is predicted to continue.[3]

Such choice has partly been made possible by increased government funding for even the most wealthy of private schools, and partly by a perception that they will better prepare children for the world. In particular, there has been a perception that public schools do not teach values and lack discipline, an apparent strength of private schools.

Last year, *The Age* newspaper reported on families, including single-parent and low income families, who work extremely hard to send their kids to private schools.[4] More recently, *The Age* reported that parents of private school students were having to pay for tutors despite paying thousands of dollars each year in fees.[5] The question has to be asked: is such use of time, which means parents have less energy and time for their children, worth the benefits of private schooling?

B. Employment patterns and effect on children

Paid work has changed over the past few decades. Women of all ages now expect to be able to choose to work. Contract and casual labour is more common, leading to frequent changes in vocation and job. What effect might labour patterns have on children and families?

One thing is clear – young people would rather more time with their parents than the ability to buy more because a parent works more.[6]

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[3] MacIntosh, A & Wilkinson, D., *School Vouchers*
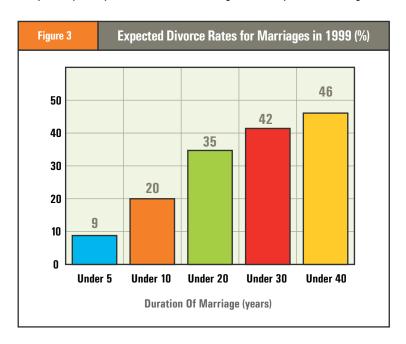[4] Average Income, Private School, *The Age*, 24/07/06
[5] Parents pay for help as private schools fail test, *The Age*, 4/05/07
[6] Pocock, B & Clarke, J *Can't buy me love?*

C. Separation/Divorce

Before writing about separation and divorce, it is important to note that not all the data is available. Divorces are registered because of court processes, but de facto (or cohabiting) relationships are not required to be ended through a legal process, and therefore there is little data on this.

Australia's percentage of divorced people is definitely increasing. In 2001, 7.4% of people over 15 years of age were divorced. Compare that to the 1976 figure of 2%. The future of divorce in Australia is not rosy. The chart below shows expected divorce rates using the divorce rate for 1999. For example, 9% of all marriages in 1999 will end within 5 years. However, if you make it past 5 years, your likelihood of divorcing before 10 years of marriage doubles to 20%.

Figure 3	Expected Divorce Rates for Marriages in 1999 (%)

Duration Of Marriage (years)

D. Smaller families

Of couples with children, a quarter have just one child. Of lone parents, the percentage is 42%. Households have dropped dramatically in size over the past 90 years. In 1911, the average household had 4.5 people residing in it. By 2001, this had dropped to 2.5. This drop can be explained by the increase in lone parent households, and families having fewer children.

One explanation for the large proportion of couples with only one child is the increasing number of Australian women who are delaying the birth of their first child. In the period between 1991 and 1999, the percentage of women who had their first child over the age of 35 doubled, from 1 in 20 (1991) to 1 in 10 (1999).

What might be the effect on maturation and communication in families of only one child?

E. Sexualisation of childhood

A new pressure on families comes in the form of a marketing-driven phenomenon known as the "sexualisation of childhood", or as one researcher provocatively stated: "Corporate Pedophilia". That is, the satisfaction of corporate greed through the sexualisation of children:

> *Images of sexualised children are becoming increasingly common in advertising and marketing material. Children who appear 12 years and under, particularly girls, are dressed, posed and made up in the same way as sexy adult models.* [7]

What could be the effect on adolescent sexuality, and the consequent family dynamics, of sexualised childhood?

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[7] Rush & Nauze, *Corporate Pedophilia*

E. Generational Poverty

Much of the work that Youth For Christ and other Christian youth workers do is with families who are entrenched in a cycle of generational unemployment, or **generational poverty**. This is in contrast to families who may be in **situational poverty**. That is, families in situational poverty are in poverty because of a loss of job, death of a breadwinner, medical costs, bad debt etc. Despite this, they still have the attitudes and values that will enable them to participate in the labour market and regain the means to live a reasonably prosperous life. Migrant families often fall into this category – poor because of the costs of travel and setting up home in a new place – but with the desire and capabilities to earn a living.

If families stay in situational poverty for long enough, then the patterns of unemployment become entrenched, as do the patterns of family breakdown and associated difficulties. Middle-class values such as "achievement" begin to be less valued. This makes sense if a family has tried and tried and tried to get ahead...and failed continually. A family begins to look for satisfaction elsewhere, and usually this is in relationships. Everyone values relationships, but families entrenched in generational poverty value them to the extent that achievement is devalued. The electricity bill doesn't get paid because Uncle Bill has come from interstate and there's a party. Homework doesn't get done because Tom wanted to go riding with me. Middle-class people *defer* and sometimes end relationships in order to achieve their goals: think of students moving city to study at their university of choice or going without a luxury in order to save money.

It is important that we understand generational poverty and its effects on families because most youth workers and youth ministers come from a middle-class background. Therefore, our expectations of families will differ from what families in generational poverty actually look like.

Characteristics of families in generational poverty [8]

Here are some characteristics of families in generational poverty, compared with middle-class families. Of course, as in all frameworks, there will be exceptions.

Generational Poverty	Middle Class
Driving forces for decision making are survival, relationships and entertainment.	Driving forces for decision making are work and achievement.
Fighting is done physically.	Fighting is done verbally.
Respect is based on personal strength.	Respect is based on merit and efforts.
Communication relies on non-verbal cues.	Communication relies on word choice.
The 'world' is defined in local terms.	The 'world' is defined in national terms.
Laugh when disciplined – saving face.	Take reprimands seriously.
Little sense of choice because fate and destiny govern.	High sense of choice – life is what you make of it.
Food is valued for its quantity.	Food is valued for its quality.
Focus of behaviour/choices is on present.	Focus of behaviour/choices is on future.

F. Building Resilient Young People - the work of the family

The work of a family is developing children who grow into resilient adults. That is, people who can steer a positive path through life while dealing with the inevitable hardships that will come their way. As Christian youth workers, our main concern regarding families should be to support them so they can develop young people who have resilience.

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[8] Payne, R. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*

Dimensions of Resilience [9]

- *Belonging:* young people need a sense of community, of belonging to a group to which they are responsible but also loved and accepted. "I am valued because I am loved and accepted". It is in this belonging that they learn how to trust and the limits of trust, an essential tool for being adult. This group could indeed be their biological family, or a youth group, friendship group, gang or club.

- *Mastery*: young people need to be competent in something that the community needs. It says, "I am valued not only because I am loved and accepted, but because I am good at something." For different people this will mean different things. For some it will be competence in a profession, or a trade. But it is not always mastery in an area of paid employment. It could be in being a good friend, fixing something, achieving in sport or music.

- *Independence:* young people need to develop a sense that their worth is not valued by conforming to the group. They are independent people who can make choices for themselves. "I am valued because I can be my own person." This is a particularly pertinent issue for young people, who swing between conforming to the group and wanting to be their own person. In our culture it is difficult to measure because so much advertising encourages young people to be independent by consuming a product. Independence is measured during times of stress when the individual's values conflict with the group they are a part of.

- *Generosity:* they are members of a community to which they have something to contribute. "I am valued because I am useful to those around me." Young people are constantly having things done for them: transport, education, time management, discipline etc. Generosity fulfils a need in them to do something for others. In a sense, generosity is the pinnacle of resilience, to which the other dimensions have been building. Belonging, Mastery and Independence are good in themselves, but they reach their true purpose in Generosity.

G. Conclusion: Christian Youth Community As Family

One option with Christian youth work is to build a community that can become an alternative family for young people with a small, dysfunctional or absent family. Christian youth community can be a place for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity to be modelled, experimented with and lived.

The positives of this are that young people can withdraw to a place of relative safety and health in order to think clearly and work on personal issues. The down side is that most such youth communities are made up of single young adults and teenagers, who will not be part of that youth community in a few years. If a crucial element of family is longevity and endurance, then Christian youth workers need to "count the cost" of whether they are willing to commit to such youth community for the long-term.

However, there are many young people in Australia's community who are not receiving the love, affirmation and belonging in their families that God intended. Christian youth communities can be a place for them to experience transforming acceptance and grace.

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[9] Brendtro, L. et al *Reclaiming Youth At-Risk*

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